

# Polari

**Polari** (from Italian *parlare*, meaning 'to talk') is a form of cant slang used in Britain by some actors, circus and fairground showmen, professional wrestlers, merchant navy sailors, criminals, prostitutes, and the gay subculture. There is some debate about its origins,<sup>[3]</sup> but it can be traced back to at least the 19th century and possibly as far as the 16th century.<sup>[4]</sup> There is a long-standing connection with Punch and Judy street puppet performers, who traditionally used Polari to converse.<sup>[5]</sup>

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Polari	
<span></span> <div>Palare, Parlary, Palarie, Palari</div>	
Region	United Kingdom and Ireland
<div>Native speakers</div>	<i>None</i> <sup>[1]</sup>
<div><span>Language family</span></div>	<div>English-based cant</div>
Language codes	
<span>ISO 639-3</span>	pld
Glottolog	pola1249 <span> </span> (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/pola1249) <sup>[2]</sup>

## Terminology

Alternate spellings include **Parlare**, **Parlary**, **Palare**, **Palarie**, and **Palari**.

## Description

Polari is a mixture of Romance (Italian<sup>[6]</sup> or Mediterranean Lingua Franca), Romani, London slang,<sup>[6]</sup> backslang, rhyming slang, sailor slang, and thieves' cant. Later it expanded to contain words from the Yiddish language and from 1960s drug subculture slang. It was a constantly developing form of language, with a small core lexicon of about 20 words, including: *bona* (good<sup>[7]</sup>), *ajax* (nearby), *EEK* (face), *cod* (bad, in the sense of tacky or vile), *naff* (bad, in the sense of drab or dull, though borrowed into mainstream British English with the sense of the aforementioned *cod*), *lattie* (room, house, flat, i.e. room to let), *nanti* (not, no), *omi* (man), *palone* (woman), *riah* (hair), *zhoosh* or *tjuz* (smarten up, stylize), *TBH* ("to be had", sexually accessible), *trade* (sex), and *vada* (see), and over 500 other lesser-known words.<sup>[8]</sup> According to a

Channel 4 television documentary,<sup>[9]</sup> there was once (in London) an "East End" version which stressed Cockney rhyming slang and a "West End" version which stressed theatrical and Classical influences. There was some interchange between the two.

## Usage

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Since the 19th century, Polari was used in London fishmarkets, the theatre, fairgrounds, and circuses, hence the many borrowings from Romani.<sup>[10]</sup> As many homosexual men worked in theatrical entertainment it was also used among the gay subculture, at a time when homosexual activity was illegal, to disguise homosexuals from hostile outsiders and undercover policemen. It was also used extensively in the British Merchant Navy, where many gay men joined ocean liners and cruise ships as waiters, stewards, and entertainers.<sup>[11]</sup>

William Shakespeare used the term *bona* (good, attractive) in *Henry IV, Part 2*, part of the expression *bona roba* (a lady wearing an attractive outfit).<sup>[12]</sup> However, "there's little written evidence of Polari before the 1890s," according to Peter Gilliver, associate editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The dictionary's entry for *rozzar* (policeman), for example, includes this quote from an 1893 book (P. H. Emerson's *Signor Lippo – Burnt Cork Artiste*):<sup>[13]</sup> "If the rozzers was to see him in bona clobber they'd take him for a gun." (If the police were to see him dressed in this fine manner, they would know that he is a thief).<sup>[12]</sup>

The almost identical **Parlyaree** has been spoken in fairgrounds since at least the 17th century<sup>[14]</sup> and continues to be used by show travellers in England and Scotland. As theatrical booths, circus acts, and menageries were once a common part of European fairs, it is likely that the roots of Polari/Parlyaree lie in the period before both theatre and circus became independent of the fairgrounds. The Parlyaree spoken on fairgrounds tends to borrow much more from Romany, as well as other languages and argots spoken by travelling people, such as cant and backslang.

Henry Mayhew gave a verbatim account of Polari as part of an interview with a Punch and Judy showman in the 1850s. The discussion he recorded references the arrival of Punch in England, crediting these early shows to a performer from Italy called Porcini (John Payne Collier's account calls him Porchini).<sup>[15]</sup> Mayhew provides the following:

### *Punch Talk*

"'Bona Parle' means language; name of patter. 'Yeute munjare' – no food. 'Yeute lente' – no bed. 'Yeute bivare' – no drink. I've 'yeute munjare,' and 'yeute bivare,' and, what's worse, 'yeute lente.' This is better than the costers' talk, because that ain't no slang and all, and this is a broken Italian, and much higher than the costers' lingo. We know what o'clock it is, besides."<sup>[5]</sup>

There are additional accounts of particular words that relate to puppet performance: "'*Slumarys*' – figures, frame, scenes, properties. '*Slum*' – call, or unknown tongue"<sup>[5]</sup> ("unknown" is a reference to the "swazzle", a voice modifier used by Punch performers, the structure of which was a longstanding trade secret).

## Decline in use

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Rainbow Plaque on Leeds City Varieties theatre

Polari had begun to fall into disuse amongst the gay subculture by the late 1960s. The popularity of Julian and Sandy, played by Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams (introduced in the radio programme *Round the Horne*, in the 1960s) ensured that some of this secret language became public knowledge.<sup>[16]</sup> The need for a secret subculture code declined with the partial decriminalization of adult homosexual acts in England and Wales under the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

## In popular culture

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- Polari was popularised in the 1960s on the popular BBC radio show *Round the Horne* starring Kenneth Horne. Camp Polari-speaking characters Julian and Sandy were played by Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams.<sup>[17]</sup>
- In the *Doctor Who* serial *Carnival of Monsters* from 1973, Vorg, a showman, believing the Doctor to also be a showman, attempts to converse with him in Polari. The Doctor states that he does not understand him.<sup>[18]</sup>
- In 1987 character Ralph Filthy, a theatrical agent played by Nigel Planer in the BBC TV series *Filthy, Rich & Catflap* regularly used Polari.
- In 1990, Morrissey released the single "Piccadilly Palare" containing a number of lyrics in Polari and exploring a subculture in which Polari was used. "Piccadilly Palare" is also the first song appearing on Morrissey's compilation album *Bona Drag*, whose title is itself taken from Polari.
- In the 1999 film *Velvet Goldmine*, two characters speak Polari while in a London nightclub. This scene contains subtitles for viewers not familiar with the language.
- In 2015, filmmakers Brian Fairbairn and Karl Eccleston made *Putting on the Dish*, a short film entirely in Polari.<sup>[19]</sup>
- In 2017, a service at Westcott House, Cambridge (a Church of England theological college) was conducted in Polari; the service was held by trainee priests to commemorate LGBT History Month; following media attention, Chris Chivers, the Principal, expressed his regret.<sup>[20][21][22][23]</sup>
- In the 2017 EP *Ricky*, Sakima sang about heteronormativity and Polari.<sup>[24]</sup>
- In 2019, the first ever opera in Polari, *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (based on the book of the same title), premiered at Espacio Turina in Seville (Spain). The libretto was entirely written in Polari by librettist and playwright Fabrizio Funari (b. 1991) while the music was composed by Germán Alonso (b. 1984) with cantaor Niño de Elche (b. 1985) in the main role. The opera was produced and performed by instrumental ensemble Proyecto OCNOS, formed by Pedro Rojas-Ogáyar and Gustavo A. Domínguez Ojalvo, with the support of ICAS Sevilla, Fundación BBVA and The Librettist.<sup>[25]</sup>
- The same year, the English-language localisation of the Japanese video game *Dragon Quest Builders 2* included a character called Jules, who spoke in Polari with non-standard capitalisation.<sup>[26]</sup>



Bona Togs clothes shop in Saint Helier, Jersey

## References

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In 2002, two books on Polari were published, *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men*, and *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (both by Paul Baker).

In 2012, artists Jez Dolan and Joseph Richardson created an iPhone app which makes available the Polari lexicon and a comprehensive list of etymologies.<sup>[27][28]</sup>

## Entry into mainstream slang

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A number of words from Polari have entered mainstream slang. The list below includes words in general use with the meanings listed: *acdc*, *barney*, *blag*, *butch*, *camp*, *khazi*, *cottaging*, *hooper*, *mince*, *ogle*, *scarper*, *slap*, *strides*, *tod*, *[rough] trade*.

The Polari word *naff*, meaning inferior or tacky, has an uncertain etymology. Michael Quinion states that it is probably from the sixteenth-century Italian word *gnaffa*, meaning "a despicable person".<sup>[29]</sup> There are a number of false etymologies, many based on acronyms— 'Not Available For Fucking' , 'Normal As Fuck', etc. —though these are backronyms. More likely etymologies include northern UK dialect *naffhead*, *naffin*, or *naffy*, a simpleton or blockhead; *niffy-naffy*, inconsequential, stupid, or Scots *nyaff*, a term of contempt for any unpleasant or objectionable person. An alternative etymology may lie in the Romany *naflo*, itself rooted in *násfalo*, meaning ill. The phrase "naff off" was used euphemistically in place of "fuck off" along with the intensifier "naffing" in *Billy Liar* by Keith Waterhouse (1959).<sup>[30]</sup> Usage of "naff" increased in the 1970s when the television sitcom *Porridge* employed it as an alternative to expletives which were not considered broadcastable at the time.<sup>[29]</sup> Princess Anne famously told a reporter, "Why don't you just naff off" at the Badminton horse trials in April 1982.<sup>[31]</sup>

"Zhoosh" (/ˈʒʊʃ/, /ˈʒuːʃ/ or /ˈʒʊʒ/<sup>[32]</sup>) meaning to smarten up, style or improve something, became commonplace more recently, having been used in the 2003 United States TV series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *What Not to Wear*.

## Polari glossary

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Numbers:

Number	Definition
<i>medza</i>	half
<i>una</i> , <i>oney</i>	one
<i>dooley</i>	two
<i>tray</i>	three
<i>quarter</i>	four
<i>chinker</i>	five
<i>say</i>	six
<i>say oney</i> , <i>setter</i>	seven
<i>say dooley</i> , <i>otter</i>	eight
<i>say tray</i> , <i>nobber</i>	nine
<i>daiture</i>	ten
<i>long dedger</i> , <i>lepta</i>	eleven
<i>kenza</i>	twelve

**Some words or phrases that may derive from Polari (this is an incomplete list):**

Word	Definition
<i>acdc, bibi</i>	bisexual <sup>[33]:49</sup>
<i>ajax</i>	nearby (shortened form of "adjacent to") <sup>[33]:49</sup>
<i>alamo!</i>	they're attractive! (via acronym "LMO" meaning "Lick Me Out!") <sup>[33]:52,59</sup>
<i>arva</i>	to have sex (from Italian <i>chiavare</i> , to screw) <sup>[34]</sup>
<i>aunt nell</i>	listen! <sup>[33]:52</sup>
<i>aunt nells</i>	ears <sup>[33]:45</sup>
<i>aunt nelly fakes</i>	earrings <sup>[33]:59,60</sup>
<i>barney</i>	a fight <sup>[33]:164</sup>
<i>bat, batts, bates</i>	shoes <sup>[33]:164</sup>
<i>bevvy</i>	drink <sup>[7]</sup>
<i>bitch</i>	effeminate or passive gay man
<i>bijou</i>	small/little (from French, jewel) <sup>[33]:57</sup>
<i>bitaine</i>	whore
<i>blag</i>	pick up <sup>[33]:46</sup>
<i>bold</i>	homosexual <sup>[34]</sup>
<i>bona</i>	good <sup>[33]:26,32,85</sup>
<i>bona nochy</i>	goodnight (from Italian – <i>buona notte</i> ) <sup>[33]:52</sup>
<i>butch</i>	masculine; masculine lesbian <sup>[33]:167</sup>
<i>buvare</i>	a drink; something drinkable (from Italian – <i>bere</i> or old-fashioned Italian – <i>bevere</i> or Lingua Franca <i>bevire</i> ) <sup>[33]:167</sup>
<i>cackle</i>	talk/gossip <sup>[33]:168</sup>
<i>camp</i>	effeminate (possibly from Italian <i>campare</i> "exaggerate, make stand out") (possibly from the phrase 'camp follower' those itinerants who followed behind the men in uniform/highly decorative dress)
<i>capello, capella, capelli, kapella</i>	hat (from Italian – <i>cappello</i> ) <sup>[33]:168</sup>
<i>carsey, karsey, khazi</i>	toilet <sup>[33]:168</sup>
<i>cartes</i>	penis (from Italian – <i>cazzo</i> ) <sup>[33]:97</sup>
<i>cats</i>	trousers <sup>[33]:168</sup>
<i>charper</i>	to search or to look (from Italian <i>acchiappare</i> , to catch) <sup>[33]:168</sup>
<i>charpering omi</i>	policeman
<i>charver</i>	sexual intercourse <sup>[33]:46</sup>
<i>chicken</i>	young man
<i>clevie</i>	vagina <sup>[35]</sup>

<i>clobber</i>	clothes <sup>[33]:138,139,169</sup>
<i>cod</i>	bad <sup>[33]:169</sup>
<i>corybungus</i>	backside, posterior <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>cottage</i>	a public lavatory used for sexual encounters (public lavatories in British parks and elsewhere were often built in the style of a Tudor cottage) <sup>[1]</sup> ( <a href="https://c8.alamy.com/comp/BJ4MCR/half-timbered-mock-tudor-public-toilet-block-in-aldeburgh-suffolk-BJ4MCR.jpg">https://c8.alamy.com/comp/BJ4MCR/half-timbered-mock-tudor-public-toilet-block-in-aldeburgh-suffolk-BJ4MCR.jpg</a> )
<i>cottaging</i>	seeking or obtaining sexual encounters in public lavatories
<i>cove</i>	taxi <sup>[33]:61</sup>
<i>dhobi / dhobie / dohbie</i>	wash (from Hindi, <i>dohb</i> ) <sup>[33]:171</sup>
<i>Dilly boy</i>	a male prostitute, from Piccadilly boy
<i>Dilly, the</i>	Piccadilly, a place where trolling went on
<i>dinari</i>	money (Latin denarii was the 'd' of the pre decimal penny) <sup>[36]</sup>
<i>dish</i>	buttocks <sup>[33]:45</sup>
<i>dolly</i>	pretty, nice, pleasant, (from Irish <i>dóighiúil</i> , handsome, pronounced 'doil')
<i>dona</i>	woman (perhaps from Italian <i>donna</i> or Lingua Franca <i>dona</i> ) <sup>[33]:26</sup>
<i>ecaf</i>	face (backslang) <sup>[33]:58,210</sup>
<i>EEK</i>	face (abbreviation of ecaf) <sup>[33]:58,210</sup>
<i>ends</i>	hair <sup>[7]</sup>
<i>esong, sedon</i>	nose (backslang) <sup>[33]:31</sup>
<i>fambles</i>	hands <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>fantabulosa</i>	fabulous/wonderful
<i>farting crackers</i>	trousers <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>feelee / feely / filly</i>	child/young (from the Italian <i>figlio</i> , for son)
<i>feelee omi / feely omi</i>	young man
<i>flowery</i>	lodgings, accommodations <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>fogus</i>	tobacco
<i>fortuni</i>	gorgeous, beautiful <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>fruit</i>	gay man
<i>funt</i>	pound £ (Yiddish)
<i>fungus</i>	old man/beard <sup>[35]</sup>
<i>gelt</i>	money (Yiddish)
<i>handbag</i>	money
<i>hoofer</i>	dancer
<i>HP (homy palone)</i>	effeminate gay man

<i>irish</i>	wig (from rhyming slang, "Irish jig")
<i>jarry</i>	food, also <i>mangarie</i> (from Italian <i>mangiare</i> or Lingua Franca <i>mangiaria</i> )
<i>jubes</i>	breasts
<i>kaffies</i>	trousers
<i>khazi</i>	toilet, also spelt carsey
<i>lacoddy</i>	body
<i>lallies / lylies</i>	legs, sometimes also knees (as in "get down on yer lallies")
<i>lallie tappers</i>	feet
<i>latty / lattie</i>	room, house or flat
<i>lau</i>	lay or place upon <sup>[37]</sup>
<i>lavs</i>	words <sup>[38]</sup>
<i>lills</i>	hands
<i>lilly</i>	police (Lilly Law)
<i>lyles</i>	legs (prob. from "Lisle stockings")
<i>lucoddy</i>	body
<i>luppers</i>	fingers (Yiddish — lapa — paw)
<i>mangarie</i>	food, also <i>jarry</i> (from Italian <i>mangiare</i> or Lingua Franca <i>mangiaria</i> )
<i>manky</i>	worthless, dirty (from Italian <i>manicare</i> – "to be lacking") <sup>[39]</sup>
<i>martinis</i>	hands
<i>measures</i>	money
<i>medzer</i>	half (from Italian <i>mezzo</i> )
<i>medzered</i>	divided <sup>[40]</sup>
<i>meese</i>	plain, ugly (from <u>Yiddish</u> <i>mieskeit</i> , in turn from Hebrew מִשְׁכֵּה repulsive, loathsome, despicable, abominable)
<i>meshigener</i>	nutty, crazy, mental (from <u>Yiddish</u> 'meshugge', in turn from Hebrew מְשֻׁגָּע crazy)
<i>meshigener carsey</i>	church <sup>[38]</sup>
<i>metzas</i>	money (Italian -mezzi "means, wherewithal")
<i>mince</i>	walk affectedly
<i>mollying</i>	involved in the act of sex <sup>[41]</sup>
<i>mogue</i>	deceive
<i>munge</i>	darkness
<i><u>naff</u></i>	awful, dull, hetero
<i>nana</i>	evil
<i>nanti</i>	not, no, none (Italian — niente)
<i>national handbag</i>	dole, welfare, government financial assistance
<i>nishta</i>	nothing <sup>[7]</sup>

<i>ogle</i>	look admiringly
<i>ogles</i>	eyes
<i>oglefakes</i>	glasses
<i>omi</i>	man (from Romance)
<i>omi-palone</i>	effeminate man, or homosexual
<i>onk</i>	nose (cf "conk")
<i>orbs</i>	eyes
<i>orderly daughters</i>	police
<i>oven</i>	mouth (nanti pots in the oven = no teeth in the mouth)
<i>palare / polari pipe</i>	telephone ("talk pipe")
<i>palliass</i>	back
<i>park, parker</i>	give
<i>plate</i>	feet (Cockney rhyming slang "plates of meat"); to fellate
<i>palone</i>	woman (Italian <i>paglione</i> – "straw mattress"; cf. old Cant <i>hay-bag</i> – "woman"); also spelled "polony" in <u>Graham Greene's</u> 1938 novel <u><i>Brighton Rock</i></u>
<i>palone-omi</i>	lesbian
<i>pots</i>	teeth
<i>quongs</i>	testicles
<i>reef</i>	touch
<i>remould</i>	sex change
<i>rozzar</i>	policeman <sup>[12]</sup>
<i>riah / riha</i>	hair (backslang)
<i>riah zhoosher</i>	hairdresser
<u><i>rough trade</i></u>	a working class or blue collar sex partner or potential sex partner; a tough, thuggish or potentially violent sex partner
<i>scarper</i>	to run off (from Italian <i>scappare</i> , to escape or run away or from rhyming slang Scapa Flow, to go)
<i>schara</i>	shame (from German <i>schade</i> , "a shame" or "a pity")
<i>schlumph</i>	drink
<i>schmutter</i>	apparel <sup>[42]</sup>
<i>schooner</i>	bottle
<i>scotch</i>	leg (scotch egg=leg)
<i>screech</i>	mouth, speak
<i>screeve</i>	write <sup>[42]</sup> (from Irish <i>scríobh</i> , to write)
<i>sharp</i>	policeman (from — charpering omi)
<i>sharp polone</i>	policewoman
<i>shush</i>	steal (from client)
<i>shush bag</i>	hold-all



<i>shyker / shyckle</i>	wig (mutation of the Yiddish <i>sheitel</i> )
<i>slap</i>	makeup
<i>so</i>	homosexual (e.g. "Is he 'so'?")
<i>stimps</i>	legs
<i>stimpcovers</i>	stockings, hosiery
<i>strides</i>	trousers
<i>strillers</i>	piano
<i>switch</i>	wig
<i>TBH (to be had)</i>	prospective sexual conquest
<i>thews</i>	thighs
<i>tober</i>	road (a <i>Shelta</i> word, Irish <i>bóthar</i> ); temporary site for a circus, carnival
<i>todd (Sloan) or tod</i>	alone
<i>tootsie trade</i>	sex between two passive homosexuals (as in: 'I don't do tootsie trade')
<i>trade</i>	sex, sex-partner, potential sex-partner
<i>troll</i>	to walk about (esp. looking for trade)
<i>vada / varder</i>	to see (from Italian — dialect <i>vardare</i> = <i>guardare</i> – look at)  vardered — vardering
<i>vera (lynn)</i>	gin
<i>vogue</i>	cigarette (from <i>Lingua Franca</i> <i>fogus</i> – "fire, smoke")
<i>vogueress</i>	female smoker
<i>wallop</i>	dance <sup>[43]</sup>
<i>willets</i>	breasts
<i>yeute</i>	no, none
<i>yews</i>	(from French "yeux") eyes
<i>zhoosh</i>	style hair, tart up, mince (cf. Romani <i>zhouzho</i> – "clean, neat")  zhoosh our riah — style our hair
<i>zhooshy</i>	showy

## Polari in use

*Omies and palones of the jury, vada well at the eek of the poor ome who stands before you, his lallies trembling.*—taken from "Bona Law", a *Round The Horne* sketch written by Barry Took and Marty Feldman

Translation: "Men and women of the jury, look well at the face of the poor man who stands before you, his legs trembling."

*So bona to vada...oh you! Your lovely eek and your lovely riah.*—taken from "Piccadilly Palare", a song by Morrissey

Translation: "So good to see...oh you! Your lovely face and your lovely hair."

*As feely ommes...we would zhoosh our riah, powder our eeks, climb into our bona new drag, don our batts and troll off to some bona bijou bar. In the bar we would stand around with our sisters, vada the bona cartes on the butch omme ajax who, if we fluttered our ogle riahs at him sweetly, might just troll over to offer a light for the unlit vogue clenched between our teeth.*—taken from *Parallel Lives*, the memoirs of renowned gay journalist Peter Burton

Translation: "As young men...we would style our hair, powder our faces, climb into our great new clothes, don our shoes and wander/walk off to some great little bar. In the bar we would stand around with our gay companions, look at the great genitals on the butch man nearby who, if we fluttered our eyelashes at him sweetly, might just wander/walk over to offer a light for the unlit cigarette clenched between our teeth."

In the *Are You Being Served?* episode "The Old Order Changes", Captain Peacock asks Mr Humphries to get "some strides for the omi with the naff riah" (i.e. trousers for the fellow with the unstylish hair).<sup>[44]</sup>

## See also

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- African American Vernacular English (sometimes called Ebonics)
- Bahasa Binan
- Boontling
- Caló (Chicano)
- Carny, North American fairground cant
- Gayle language
- Gay slang
- Grypsera
- IsiNgqumo
- Lavender linguistics
- Lunfardo and Vesre
- Rotwelsch
- shelta
- Swardspeak
- Verlan
- Lubunca

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## External links

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- Chris Denning's article on Polari with bibliography (<http://www.chris-d.net/polari/>)
  - The Polari Bible compiled by The Manchester Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (<http://www.polaribible.org/>)
  - Polari Mission exhibit (<https://web.archive.org/web/20131202222545/http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/exhibitions/polarimission/>) (archived) at the University of Manchester's John Rylands Library
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  - Paul Clevett's Polari Translator (<http://www.bigcar.co.uk/polari/>)
  - *Putting it on the Dish*, a 2015 short film featuring Polari extensively
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